

## **Estonians in the U. S. Armed Forces after World War II: an overview<sup>1</sup>**

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After the end of World War II the victorious allies faced numerous problems and difficulties in post-war Europe. Among others were the millions of war refugees and thousands of ex-servicemen who had served in the German armed forces during the war and had now been taken prisoners of war. Almost a quarter of the people in Germany and Austria, for example, were refugees: even in 1947 the United States still had custody of 47,396 displaced persons<sup>2</sup> in Austria alone, of which 90 percent were deemed 'irrepatriatable' because of the political situation in Eastern Europe.

In the eyes of many Europeans, these groups were little more than sources of disease and crime. They were seen as competitors for scarce housing and jobs and as potential recruits for future demagogues who might trigger another European conflict. To enhance the stability of fragile post-war states, it was essential to resolve the status of Europe's stateless populations as quickly as possible.

The western allies, however, did not have a clear concept of what to do about the East-European nationals who generally refused to return to their home country. Thus various options were implemented: it was rather common that officials responsible for the screening process acted according to their own standpoints, political beliefs and in some cases also the luck of draw. Especially in the French zone there were cases when refugees were handed over to the Soviet representatives and sent back 'home' by force.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by author.

<sup>2</sup> Displaced person – a person who, as part of a mass movement, has been forced to flee his or her home or place of habitual residence suddenly or unexpectedly as a result of armed conflict, internal strife, systematic violation of human rights, fear of such violation, or natural or man-made disasters, and who has not crossed an internationally recognized State border.

On the refugees' side (both civilian and ex-servicemen), however, the goal was simple: to be freed and to find a source of income. Being freed went relatively easy since the Displaced Persons' Commission soon came to a conclusion that most of the men from Eastern Europe who had a record of service in the German armed forces were either in the auxiliary services or were forced to enlist; they did not serve on ideological basis. In the case of Estonians, for example, the first 22 ex-servicemen were freed in July 1945; the release of the last Estonians took place in November 1946.

### Guard and Labour Companies

However, the released men needed work. A solution was found with the hiring of these men into the guard and labour companies of the U.S. Army Europe. The first Labour Service Companies in Germany (West) were established in the summer of 1945 from liberated Polish prisoners of war (POW). Most of them were engaged in the guarding of German POWs captured by the U.S. Army. The ranks of the first Polish Labour Service guard companies were soon swelled by members of the free Polish units, which did not want to go to England for demobilization or repatriation to Poland. Rather, after their withdrawal from Italy, they decided to remain in western Germany.

In addition to providing the refugees with work, the U.S. Army Europe also had a practical need for such companies. With the swift return of the U.S. forces back to the United States in 1946, the demand for more guard units grew rapidly.

On 6 December 1946, with the depletion of the Polish manpower reserves, General Joseph Taggart McNarney (Commanding General of the U.S. Forces in the European Theater of Operations and Commanding General of the Office of U.S. Military Government, Germany) gave permission to form the Baltic Labour Service Companies. The Baltic guards were established by U.S. Army Major Nathan Moxley who was in charge of physical security of U.S. Army installations in the Nuremberg-Fuerth area, as he could not obtain enough Polish guards. He first unofficially recruited two platoons of Baltic guards in the summer of 1946, and when

the arrangement seemed to work, convinced the Commanding General to issue a General Order to Establish the Baltic Labour Service Companies.

United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) officials who were responsible for the displaced persons also saw in the constructive employment of the displaced persons an opportunity to weed out 'spongers' who apparently were content to stay in the camps as long as they could get food and shelter without exertion. As a result of the plan, Baltic DPs over 18 were told that they must either go to work or lose their status as displaced persons under UNRRA.

On December 21, 1946 the first three Baltic Companies – 88th (later 4204th) Lithuanian, 90th (later 8920th) Latvian, and 92nd (later 4221st) Estonian – departed for Mannheim-Kaefertal Labour Service Training Center. Each unit was composed of 8 officers and 268 men.

The most noteworthy mission of the Baltic Companies was to guard the German war criminals at the Nuremberg Prison. The Estonian 4221st Guard Company served there together with the Latvian 8920 Guard Company. Many guards have later confessed that they were guarding their ex-superiors and as one guard has put it, 'it was an experience of a lifetime.'

Soon the Baltic manpower reserves also became depleted and the first units, mostly guard-type, were formed from all other eastern European nationals who could not return to their homeland because of Soviet occupation (these also included Albanians and Yugoslavians). As a result, there were more than thirty different types of Labour Service Companies in the early 1950s. In addition to the guard and labour companies there were also such units as minesweeping, amphibian, aircraft maintenance, guard dogs, and railway military police companies. In fact, from 1946 to the early 1950s, the United States had more refugees as civilian employees than military personnel in the European theater.

Of course the Soviet Union could not accept the formation of those companies. In Estonia, for example, as soon as the first units were formed the radio stations started to broadcast shows to make the companies look bad (e.g. Major Moxley was referred to as a 'bandit'). As members of the companies were dressed in a U.S. uniform taylored black the men swiftly became 'the black men', whose soul was as black as their uniform.

The Soviet Union, naturally, wanted the refugees and POWs to be repatriated (that is brought back to their homeland by force if need be). Jossif Stalin had benefited from an agreement concluded at the Jalta Conference: the Western allies had pleaded to help the millions of Soviet citizens return to their country.

### The idea of the Volunteer Freedom Corps

However, the Americans had even greater plans with the DPs. As the time of the formation of the companies (1946) was also the beginning of the Cold War the Americans considered various ways for the protection of Western Europe and one must certainly note the Volunteer Freedom Corps (VFC). The VFC proposed the creation of combat units, which would be formed on national basis from the European DPs – just like the guard and labour companies described before. They would be stationed in Germany and Austria under the military control of the USA.

The main supporter of the VFC in the U.S. was Henry C. Lodge, a republican Senator of Massachusetts. The Senator saw the recruitment of foreigners as a first step in the ambitious plan to further provide personnel to the U.S. military. The new combatants would be placed, according to James Carafono, ‘to the front lines of the Cold War in Germany and Austria.’

The idea was backed by Dwight D. Eisenhower when he became the 34th President of the United States in 1953. Enlisting Europe’s unwanted and refugee national groups to fight together for a common cause would, he believed, serve as a powerful demonstration of the potential for Europeans to provide for their own collective security. With that in mind, Eisenhower detected ‘a great deal of sense in the whole idea’ of raising a legion composed of displaced foreign nationals. Another important fact was Eisenhower’s promise to ‘roll back’ communism from Europe.

The greatest objection to the corps, however, lay in Europe. The Germans, Austrians and French were already negatively disposed towards the DPs and refugees as finding a job and providing their own families with

food was difficult. The idea of actually arming the DPs exceeded the tolerance of local inhabitants. A report from Austria stated that the Austrians did not want 'to increase their population with people who were foreign in culture, tradition, language, and morals, nor did they want politically dissident groups like Yugoslavs, Poles, or White Russians.' Greatly because of that the idea of the VFC was never realized.

### The end of the companies

In 1952 the process to integrate the companies with the German economy was started. Uniforms, other than work, were changed to grey ones and the German units were redesignated the Civilian Labour Groups in order to provide a marked difference between them and the newly-organized German Army (*Bundeswehr*). American supervisory detachments were removed from the units and the service became more oriented toward the German economic and social support, and also more self-sufficient.

The ranks of the non-German Labour Service were further reduced by emigration to the United States: in 1948 the U.S. Congress adopted the Displaced Persons Act, which stipulated quotas for different nationalities for immigration to the USA. A considerable number of people also emigrated to Canada, Australia and England.

This reduction was further stimulated by the Senator Lodge Act, which permitted 10,000 Labour Service members of non-Germanic origin to become U.S. Army enlisted men with a five-year contract.

However, the biggest shock to the Labour Service came on 30 June 1964 when, on relatively short notice, the overall strength was cut in half. The non-German units especially suffered because it was more difficult for these members to find suitable employment in the civilian economy. Neither could they join the German army, as many Germans did. Some of the reasons for the cut are still classified but, in general, it was an attempt to save money and stem the gold flow out of the United States.

No doubt this opportunity provided the ex-soldiers and refugees a sense of security in the uncertain post-war period: it provided employ-

ment and ensured existence. Of significance was also the principle of nationality: the units consisted only of men of one particular nationality and this became a unifying factor, which helped to establish a basis for respective communities in exile and the maintenance of national identity in the following years.

### Estonians in the U.S. armed forces during the Cold War conflicts

In 1946–1957 more than 12,000 Estonians arrived to the USA and thus by the end of the 1950s the total number of Estonians in the States increased to 30,000. They created a new society, Estonia Abroad (the *Välis-Eesti*), where besides preserving their original culture also the customs and language of the new homeland had to be adopted. American Estonians, including many Estonians connected to the U.S. Armed Forces, founded many organizations, the primary goal of which was the restoration of the independence of Estonia.

After emigration to the USA many Estonians started or continued their service in the U.S. Armed Forces. They had different reasons for the service. For many it was compulsory as also non-citizens could be conscripted if needed. In addition there were many Estonians who were in the armed forces voluntarily: some saw this as a career possibility, some wanted to revenge the communists for occupying Estonia. For others it was also a way to express their gratitude towards their new homeland that had given them a second chance.

The article concludes that Estonians have fought in numerous Cold War conflicts in the arrays of the U.S. Armed Forces. They have been engaged in fierce battles in Korea and in Vietnam, but have also served as instructors for draftees, and controlled intercontinental ballistic missiles. One distinguished woman of Estonian origin, Major General Tiiu Kera even worked as Intelligence Director in the USAF. She is also the highest-ranking Estonian in the U.S. Armed Forces. Career in the U.S. Armed Forces motivated many and indeed, Estonians have served there from private to general.